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AN APPRECIATION

BY

WILLIAM LYON PHELPS

"Ah, poor Real Life, which I love, can I make others see the delight I find in thy foolish and insipid face?"

THE literary career of Mr. Howells covered exactly sixty years, his first book appearing in 1860. His published works number more than one hundred; they form a complete library. They include novels, poems, plays, literary essays, short stories, sketches of travel, autobiography and spiritual confessions. I do not find a badly written page. Despite the enormous quantity of his production, his composition shows no evidence of haste. He seemed to write evenly and tranquilly, with a style accurately fitted to the subject. His friend Henry James, whose every word was an awarded prize out of a host of competitors, never ceased to wonder at the excellent quality of this inexhaustible flow.

I should think it would make you as happy as poor happiness will let us be, to turn off from one year to the other, and from a reservoir in daily, domestic use, such a free, full, rich flood. In fact your reservoir deluges me, altogether, with surprise as well as other sorts of effusion; by which I mean that though you do much to empty it you keep it remarkably full. I seem to myself, in comparison, to fill mine with a teaspoon and obtain but a trickle. However, I don't mean to compare myself with you or to compare you, in the particular case, with anything but life. When I do that—with the life you see and represent—your faculty for representing it seems to me extraordinary—and to shave the truth—the general truth you aim at—several degrees closer than anyone else begins to do. You are less *big* than Zola, but you are ever so much less clumsy and more really various, and moreover you and he don't see the same things—you have a wholly different consciousness—you see a wholly different side of a different race. Man isn't at all *one*, after all—it takes so much of him to be American, to be French, etc. I won't even compare you with something I have a sort of dim stupid sense you might be and are not—for I don't in the least know that you might be it, after all, or whether, if you were, you wouldn't cease to be that something you are

which makes me write to you thus. We don't know what people might give us that they don't—the only thing is to take them on what they do and to allow them absolutely and utterly their conditions. . . . the fact that there's a whole quarter of the heaven upon which, in the matter of composition, you seem consciously—is it consciously?—to have turned your back; but these things have no relevancy whatever as grounds of dislike—simply because you communicate so completely *what* you undertake to communicate. The novelist is a particular *window*, absolutely—and of worth in so far as he is one; and it's because you open so well and are hung so close over the street that I could hang out of it all day long.

The precise aim of Mr. Howells and its happy success have perhaps never been better stated than in this informal letter from his rival. He chose to portray real life as he knew it through long observation and experience. He was a Realist by instinct and by training. He was so kindly that no one thinks of him as a good hater; but he had, after all, an average human capacity for hatred, and the two things in the world he hated most were falsehood and affectation. It is curious to see how the instinctive honesty of the man affected his own creative fiction and limited his sympathies as a critic. In him we find something by no means universal—a complete union of the moral character with the artistic temperament. He disliked any person or any book that did not ring true; he hated snobs and snobbery because they illustrated the vice of affectation, and in talking about such things he was as violent as he knew how to be.

It was, I think, merely his love of truth that made him write stories where every page could be verified, and made him unsympathetic to books of romance. He was right in despising many of the pseudo-historical romances with which America was flooded during the last decade of the last century; he lumped all these together as “romantic rot,” and I have seen him laugh till the tears came while quoting specimens of their anachronistic oaths and impossible jargon. When I called his attention to their chronically gymnastic heroines who were always drawing themselves up to their full height, I feared for his health.

Those were bad days for the root and branch realists, because, owing to the influence of Stevenson and the natural reaction against the excesses of realism, the public had gone mad over romance. It is interesting to look back and see how that outbreak in the 'nineties affected our Great Three

—Howells, Henry James, and Mark Twain. No really important novel came from the first, though he resolutely refused to change his style; Henry James spent six valuable years in a futile endeavor to write a successful play, and then, in 1898, he wrote the best ghost story I know, *The Turn of the Screw*; Mark Twain launched a romantic dreadnought called *Joan of Arc*.

It is fortunate for Americans that our great novelists—Hawthorne, Mark Twain, Henry James, and Howells—all wrote guide-books to the European scene. For a summer tour on the Continent, or for a prolonged sojourn, no better travelling companions can be found than these four. I do not think that anyone has ever written a more vivid description of the beautiful tower in Siena than Mr. Howells:

It was in the clearness that follows the twilight when, after the sudden descent of a vaulted passage, I stood in the piazza and saw the Tower of the Mangia leap like a rocket into the starlit air. After all, that does not say it: you must suppose a perfect silence, through which this exquisite shaft forever soars. When once you have seen the Mangia, all other towers, obelisks, and columns are tame and vulgar and earth-rooted; *that* seems to quit the ground, to be not a monument but a flight. The crescent of the young moon . . . looked sparsely over the battlements of the Palazzo Communale, from which the tower sprang, upon the fronts of the beautiful old palaces . . . and touched with silver the waters of the loveliest fountain in the world.

The four pillars on which our novelist's fame securely rests are *A Modern Instance*, *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, *Indian Summer*, and *The Kentons*. Contrary to the general opinion, I rank the first above the second. I once asked him which of all his stories he liked the best, and he replied with an interrogation point. I therefore named *A Modern Instance*. He reflected for a moment and then said with deliberation, "That is undoubtedly my strongest work; but of all the books I have ever written, I most enjoyed writing *Indian Summer*, which is perhaps my favorite." I should not like to say that Mr. Howells was a greater novelist than George Eliot; but the same melancholy theme—slow, moral decay—is surely more convincingly treated in *A Modern Instance* than in *Romola*. Furthermore, the passion of jealousy—so often farcically presented on the stage—is here analysed more acutely and more profoundly than anywhere else in modern fiction.

The Rise of Silas Lapham is an excellent illustration of Henry James's metaphor—the novelist's window opened on an American street. Page after page gives us the pleasure

of recognition; we know that these things are true. *Indian Summer* takes us to the most charming city in Europe, Florence, where, in a frame of extraordinary beauty, the portrait is astonishingly real. No wonder he felt the ultimate happiness of an artist in writing that book; the ardent glow of composition illuminates and warms the reader's mind. *The Kentons* is a child of the novelist's old age. American family life is presented with insight, sympathy, and tenderness. The small boy, Boyne, who, in most novels, would have been an ubiquitous nuisance, is irresistible. Boyne "was a mass of helpless sweetness though he did not know it." His delightful pose of aloof haughtiness is thus described by his creator: "He thought he was an iceberg when he was merely an ice cream of heroic mould."

But the man was greater than anything he wrote. He was an American, and had an American career, rising by his own efforts from obscurity to absolute primacy. Those few who attacked his art drew universal attention to their own littleness; no one attacked his personality. He showed that it was possible to combine the utmost refinement and delicacy with the most rugged manliness. Men so totally different as Mark Twain and Henry James loved him with no reservations, and had a respect for his mind and character that came near to reverence. His blood was untainted by conceit or selfishness. He was both virile and modest, a true democrat. Working daily at his chosen task, he found time for acts of kindness and generosity that will be gratefully remembered by men and women in every corner of America.

WILLIAM LYON PHELPS.